DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 477 911 JC 030 349

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TITLE	Student Involvement in the Community College Setting. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges, Los Angeles, CA.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-JC-03-02
PUB DATE	2003-02-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0010
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges. University of California at Los Angeles, 3051 Moore Hall, P.O. Box 951521, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1524. Tel: 310-825-3931. For full text: http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/ERIC/eric.html.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Ancillary School Services; Community Colleges; *Educationally Disadvantaged; Immigrants; Minority Groups; Non English Speaking; *Nontraditional Students ; Orientation; *School Holding Power; *School Orientation; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This document discusses the challenges community colleges, particularly urban ones, face in delivering education to their first-generation, immigrant, economically disadvantaged, non-white, limited-English-ability, and other non-traditional students. These challenges can be exacerbated by students' failure to connect and become involved in college at the level necessary to successfully complete required coursework. According to Tinto (1997), high levels of involvement generally prove to be an independent predictor of gains in learning. The author argues that a redefinition of what constitutes involvement is called for, particularly because non-resident students tend to work at least part time, limiting their ability to become involved in traditional campus activities. Brawer (1996) reported findings from a study that indicated involvement in a freshman orientation course improved student performance regardless of race, age, gender, major, employment status, or entrance examination scores. Brawer noted another study that reported a 50% higher rate of course completion among students who participated in freshman orientation at Sacramento Community College in California. Learning Assistance Centers (LAC) and learning communities also help students to manage academic demands. LACs offer 14 academic and co-curricular activities, including testing, study skills programs, and peer tutoring. Learning communities serve to link together existing courses to enable subgroups of students and their teachers to achieve deeper understanding and integration of course materials. (Contains 15 references.) (NB)

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Digest

February, 2003 EDO-JC-03-02

Student Involvement in the Community College Setting

By Christopher A. Chaves

American community colleges, urban ones in particular, face unique challenges with their first-generation, immigrant, economically disadvantaged, non-White, and limited English ability students (Hirose-Wong, 1999). Moreover, many traditional and non-traditional students alike are inadequately prepared, academically and psychologically, for college-level work and learning (Howell, 2001). These challenges can be exacerbated by students' failure to connect and become involved in college at the level necessary for academic and workplace success, herein defined as successful completion of required course work.

Astin (1984) defines involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 134). According to Tinto (1997), high levels of student involvement generally proved to be an independent predictor of gains in learning. Tinto (1987) posits that achieving success in student retention generally "hinges on the construction of educational communities in college, program, and classroom level which integrate students into the ongoing social and intellectual life of the institution" (p. 188). In the community college setting, a redefinition of what constitutes "involvement" is necessary, primarily because this non-residential constituency usually works at least part-time and, as a consequence, finds it difficult to become involved in traditional campus activities. This digest discusses three student involvement opportunities – freshmen orientation, learning resource centers, and community college learning communities – that can be critical for students' academic success.

Freshman Orientation Seminar

Freshman orientation programs are a proven method to assist in raising students' levels of academic performance, retention, and degree program completion. Cuseo (1997) provides a comprehensive taxonomy of major topics that should be included in an effective student-centered freshman seminar, including the college experience, academic skill development, academic and career planning, and life management.

In her review of studies of retention, Brawer (1996) reported findings from a study conducted at four North Carolina community colleges indicating that involvement in a freshman orientation course improved student performance regardless of race, age, gender, major, employment status, or entrance exam scores. Brawer further noted a study at Valencia Community College in Florida, where an extended orientation course provides comprehensive learning assistance during the critical freshmen year. The results indicated that between 1987 and 1992, 81% of students enrolling in the extended orientation course succeeded in passing their first-term courses, compared with only 56% of those students who enrolled in other college preparatory courses. After four academic terms, 65% of the students enrolled in the extended orientation course persisted as enrolled students. Additionally, a study of students who participated in a freshman orientation seminar at Sacramento Community College in California completed courses at a 50% higher rate than those students who had not participated (Barefoot, 1993).

Learning Assistance Centers (LAC)

Continued comprehensive learning assistance is necessary to help students manage the academic demands placed upon them. Maxwell (1997) identifies the 14 academic and co-curricular activities offered by LACs. They include academic evaluation and diagnostic testing, programs to improve study skills, peer tutoring; supplemental instruction, computer assisted instruction, remedial courses, faculty outreach services, contact with college faculty, contact with college administrators, ongoing staff development/certification, referral services, counseling, advising, and program evaluation through surveys and questionnaires.

According to Enright (1997), LACs create a "sense of place" for the non-traditional student and assist in boosting student retention. The following two examples describe pertinent activities of successful LACs. At Allegheny Community College in Maryland, student involvement activities include a freshman seminar designed to achieve connection between students and faculty members; a college-funded, on-campus work-study program; a women's center designed to provide assistance specifically to non-traditional female students; the establishment of more student organizations; and a faculty development program (Brawer, 1996). At Bronx Community College in New York, student services professionals offer the Freshmen Year Initiative Program (FYIP), a comprehensive academic and counseling service for first-semester students who require assistance in English, reading, and mathematics. The FYIP offers the Freshmen Outreach, Caring, Understanding, and Support (FOCUS) Center; in concert with other assistance programs, this center is a holistic counseling center designed to provide confidential help with individual, developmental, vocational, academic, and social problems via counseling interviews, psychological assessment, and pertinent educational and occupational data. Preliminary results indicated that between fall 1993 and fall 1994, FYIP participants persisted at a rate of 76.5%, compared to non-participants (59.3%) (Baron, 1997).

LACs can also create a sense of involvement and community through methods that also incorporate computer technology, collaborative learning, and collective learning (Enright, 1997). For instance, supplemental instruction (SI)

programs afford students who have done exceptionally well in a difficult course to re-enroll in the same course for the purpose of undertaking a leadership role. The SI student leader serves as a model learner, who completes all assignments, takes class notes, and takes required exams along with other students in class. Research indicates that students participating in SI programs earn higher average scores, compared with non-SI students of equal ability (Levitz, 1990).

Learning Communities

According to Kellogg (1999), learning communities can be any form of curricular design that links together existing courses to enable subgroups of students and their teachers to achieve a deeper understanding and integration of the course material. Common learning community models include freshmen interest groups, linked courses, learning clusters, and federated learning communities. At Long Beach City College in California, faculty and administrators created the Students and Teachers Achieving Results (STAR) program to increase the academic success and retention rates of underrepresented students (Mackay et al., 1996). The STAR program links courses designed to (1) develop effective communication skills, (2) build self-esteem, (3) leverage faculty expertise, and (4) utilize interdisciplinary and cooperative learning models.

Academic-occupational integration (AOI) is another learning community model. Perin (2001) defines AOI as "the fusion of reading, writing, English language, math and/or critical thinking skills with career related instruction" (p. 305). There are five AOI models, including linked courses, known as paired or tandem courses; course clusters, also characterized as learning communities; infused occupational courses, which offer writing instruction within an occupational course; infused academic courses, which use occupational themes to teach academic courses; and hybrid courses, which are single courses that incorporate occupational and academic content. One of the major benefits of AOI is said to be that it is a student-centered instructional method that emphasizes literacy skills for the workplace. Example AOI models include one located at a community college in an urban northeastern city with a large immigrant population that linked an intermediate course in ESL with Introduction to Computers for business students and another located at a urban midwestern city that offered a course cluster for nursing students entitled, "Introduction to Healthcare: Nursing, Philosophy, and College Composition."

Conclusion

Community colleges will continue to educate a unique group of traditional and non-traditional students. Many of the students the colleges serve are unprepared for college-level academics and require assistance and involvement opportunities to successfully achieve their academic goals. Since an increasing number of community college students must work full-time or can only attend classes part-time, finding the opportunity to connect and become involved in the college environment is a continuing challenge.

At the community college, effective involvement occurs when students participate in orientation programs, receive on-going academic assistance, and experience a curriculum that connects classroom requirements to workplace relevance and skills. If community colleges are to involve their students effectively, a focus on serving them through a variety of activities such as those discussed here can lead to the kind of critical engagement necessary for improved learning and retention.

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This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-99-CO-0010. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

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